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ABSTRACT

Spelling is only beneficial when it is connected to reading and writing. Upper elementary and middle grade students have a tremendous need to be heard, and teachers should focus on spelling for the power it holds in communication--people spell to communicate more effectively in writing. To teach spelling separate and apart from writing and reading makes no sense and in reality is an effort in futility. It has no meaning to young writers and readers. Spelling instruction in the upper elementary and middle grades should focus on how to use words to make writing more powerful for an audience. Adolescents must come to understand the purpose for which they write and whom they are writing to. The following activities will be useful as teachers focus adolescent writers on the use and power of words to enhance writing: Unusual Words We Know; Frequently Misspelled Words; Weekly/Daily Edits; Spelling Notebooks; Word Search; Crosswords; Word Finals; Derivational Webs; and Visual Imagery. Children go through developmental stages as they spell, and the more they read and write for authentic purposes, the quicker they move through these stages with a better understanding of letters and sounds and words. (NKA)

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Adolescents: How Can We Help Them Spell?

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Adolescents: How Can We Help Them Spell?

For the better part of this century, spelling, along with English, has been introduced and "taught" as distinct subjects; separate and apart from one another. English has been taught in a very traditional way where the teacher defines a particular part of speech, the students complete the sentences in the book by underlining or circling, and then they complete an assigned worksheet for homework. Very little, if any, time is allotted for writing and putting to use the concepts "learned" during English time. Likewise, spelling has been taught in traditional ways whereby spelling words are taken from a spelling textbook series. Words are introduced on Monday and children are asked to write these words five-ten times each. On Tuesday, children are asked to complete sections A and B in their spelling text, and on Wednesday, they take a pre-test and are asked to write sentences with their words or use their words in a story. Thursday, the children complete sections C and D from the text and Friday they take their post-test.

Over the years, teachers have discovered through these traditional teaching techniques, that children who make 100 on their spelling tests and A's on all their English assignments always make 100 and A's and the children who do poorly always do poorly. These methods of instruction do not appear to do anything to enhance children's spelling ability or their ability to write. Yet, teachers continue to use these outmoded methods of teaching, and upper elementary and middle grade students continue to have difficulty spelling and writing.

Connecting Reading, Writing, and Spelling

Research in spelling has been extensive since the early 1980's (Wilde, 1990; Henderson, 1985; Laminack & Wood, 1996). The findings have revealed the fact that, as teachers, we must begin looking at spelling, writing and reading in different ways. Spelling is not a separate entity that exists by itself. We do not spell words simply for the sake of spelling words (although the

National Spelling Bee would suggest otherwise). Spelling is only beneficial when it is connected to writing and reading. Reading is the cornerstone for increased vocabulary and advanced spelling (Smith, 1998). Smith (1998) states that children at the middle school and high school levels learn an average of 3400 words a year ranging from 8500 to 1500 words. The difference between students who learn 8500 and 1500 words is reading. The learning of new words never stops provided we keep encountering new words in a comprehensible context. Working on contrived word lists from a spelling text does not produce this result. For upper elementary and middle grade learners, reading is paramount. Not only do they need to read daily, they also need to talk about the books they read – discussing them with attentive adults as well as with other students. When students read and talk about their books, meaning is enhanced. Words are seen as powerful tools to get messages and meaning across.

Not only must middle grade students read in order to attain a greater understanding of words in context, they must also begin to view spelling "in use" (Laminack & Wood, 1996) for their own communication. Focusing on spelling for the power it holds in communication instills in students the desire to let their voices be heard. Upper elementary and middle grade students have a tremendous need to be heard. They are actively seeking their place in this world. They are searching for a personal identity. Writing holds the power by which these students begin to find a connection.

There is a direct link between reading, writing and spelling. The three cannot or should not be separated. We spell in order to communicate more effectively in writing. We read to discover meaning in the choices writers make. The purpose of spelling is to assist children in their writing in order to communicate more effectively to an audience. To teach spelling

separate and apart from writing and reading makes no sense and in reality is an effort in futility. It has no meaning to young writers and readers.

Spelling instruction in the upper elementary and middle grades should focus on how to use words in order make writing more powerful for an audience. It should include strategies and techniques that will make students lifelong users of spelling.

Spelling Strategies for Upper Elementary and Middle Grade Learners

It should be noted, once again, that spelling in isolation away from writing and reading is of no consequence. Spelling in connection with writing and reading gives meaning to the use of words. Purpose and audience must be established. Adolescents must come to understand the purpose for which they write and to whom they are writing to. They must see a need to write and share what has been written. Once writing is complete, upper elementary and middle grade students need to come to understand the importance of respect for the audience. Writing for different audiences for authentic purposes gives meaning to the need for conventional spelling. Atwell (1998) discusses the pact that is inherent between the writer and the reader. In order to communicate fully and completely to an audience, certain conventions must be followed. Readers expect certain conventions to be present in order to read more fully and understand more completely the intended message from the author. Spelling is one such convention that shows respect for the reader.

While spelling in use is of the utmost importance, there is a need to focus directly on words. Making time during the day to focus on spelling is of benefit to students (Atwell, 1998). The following activities will be useful as teachers focus adolescent writers on the use and power of words to enhance writing.

Unusual Words We Know. In order to help upper elementary and middle grade learners to focus on words for the power they can hold in their writing, it is important to call attention to words. Create a bulletin board or chart in the room entitled, "Unusual Words We Know". The teacher begins the list with a word or words he/she has discovered through reading. The word is discussed and students are invited to locate and share unusual words they might find. Time is spent each day talking about the words found and how they can be used in writing.

Frequently Misspelled Words. No author knows how to spell every single word he/she will use in his/her writing. Upper elementary and middle grade learners need to understand this and know how and where to go for assistance in spelling these difficult words. The words for the list come from the students' writing. These "demon" words are words that cause many people difficulty. Word such as *there, their, they're; differentiate*, and *receive* are a few that cause writers difficulties at times. Placing these words on a chart so students can see them will assist in making these words come more naturally.

Weekly/Daily Edits. Spelling becomes important as young writers get ready to publish. It is during the editing phase of the writing process that upper elementary and middle grade learners need to focus their full attention on the conventional spelling of words. Editing does not come naturally for many writers. For adolescent writers, they must be taught how to edit for spelling and be given opportunities to practice the art of editing. One way to do this is to take two days a week and practice editing a piece of writing for spelling errors. This does not need to be done for an extended period of time; maybe 5 minutes each day. Teach students to begin at the end of their piece of writing and read words from the end back to the beginning. In this way, the student is focusing only on the words rather than the flow of the story.

Spelling Notebooks. Spelling notebooks are an effective tool for middle grade learners. Students purchase spiral notebooks and divide it into sections. One section contains frequently used and misspelled words which learners locate while editing. These words can be discussed with the teacher or a peer to find out where the problem lies with the spelling of the word. A second section contains words the student has successfully learned how to spell and now uses in his/her writing. This gives the learner a sense of his/her own growth and accomplishment.

Word Search. Henderson (1985) notes that children who rely on sound alone will never learn to spell. It is those who are able to "walk through" words, to see the patterns, and note the uniqueness of words who truly become spellers of English. Word searches are one way that encourages learners to focus on the visual aspects of words. They are encouraged to "walk through" words in order to come to know them. In mini-lessons, children are introduced to within word patterns they may be having difficulty with. Students are then told to search for words that contain the same patterns. They will look in the books they are reading, magazines, newspapers, and print around the environment. In doing this, children are focusing their attention on the words themselves, finding similarities and differences among words.

Crosswords. Crossword puzzles can be useful in assisting upper elementary and middle school learners to focus on letters within words. The crosswords may be used to build words (similar to Scrabble) or they may be used, in the traditional sense, with definitions. Select word students are using in their writing or words you feel they need to know.

Word Finds. A familiar technique that is used in younger elementary grades is the Word Find. This is a technique whereby children are given a grid-marked sheet with letters covering the entire sheet. Lost in these letters are words the children must find. Upper elementary and middle grade learners benefit from these Word Finds as do younger children. It helps learners

see words while focusing on individual letters. Again, words learners use in their writing should be included.

Derivational Webs. As children get older their curiosity about where words come from increases. Upper elementary and middle school learners will benefit from webs created using a familiar word and locating all derivatives of the word. Lessons can then be taught as to how the spelling of these derivatives are similar to the original.

Visual Imagery. All spellers and writers benefit from learning how to "see" words rather than simply hear the sounds. While hearing sounds within words is vitally important as children grow into mature spellers, being able to visualize the word produces competent, independent spellers and writers. We can teach children to visualize by following a simple procedure. Take a laminated file folder and divide the top portion into three sections. Instruct the students that under the first flap they are write the word. They are then to spell the word aloud while pointing to each individual letter. Finally, they are to close their eyes, say the word, picture what it looks like, and then spell the word. Under the second flap, students will write each word and check it. The third flap requires the help of a peer. The partner calls out each word and the student writes the word as he/she says each letter. This procedure not only allows practice with the words, but also helps the learner come to visualize each word.

No one really knows how children come to learn to spell. What we do know is that children go through developmental stages as they spell. We also know that the more children write and read for authentic purposes, the quicker they move through these stages with a better understanding of letters and sounds and words. For the upper elementary and middle school learner, spelling is only important when words are used for meaningful purposes as they write.

Direct instruction and focus on words students use in their writing assists them as they strive to convey meaning to audiences.

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